

We've Come a Long Way, Baby: Reflecting Thirty Years after *Reading the Romance*

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The publication of *Reading the Romance* made room at the academic table for doing scholarly work on romance. Radway's book has made it possible for me to pursue scholarly work that I not only enjoy, but also hold near to my heart. Yet doing popular romance studies today can sometimes be made difficult by some of the impressions of romance left in the wake of this text. Nearly everywhere I go as a scholar, people know *Reading the Romance* – or, at least, they know bits and pieces of the work. Peers, colleagues, and even professors make comments about romance novels, patriarchy, and bored housewives and wait for me to make my own dismissive comments about the genre. This is usually the point where I gently remind people that *Reading the Romance* was published before I was born, and that just as romance (like all genres) constantly reinvents itself while maintaining its core identity, so, too, does romance scholarship, or at least it ought to do so. Indeed, in her revised introduction, Radway herself remarks that less than ten years after her work's initial publication, she is struck “by how much the book's argument is a product of a very particular historical moment,” a moment “colored not only by [her] own previous academic trajectory and by the past development of the specific community [she] intended to address but also by a larger intellectual environment that impinged on [her] work invisibly and from a distance, but no less forcefully for that” (1).

The “particular historical moment” of Radway's work is, in part, the one when scholarship informed by second-wave feminism met the “bodice-rippers” of the 1970s and 80s. As a reader of romance novels and as a third-wave(ish) feminist, I often find these older novels both appalling and frustrating. As a scholar, however, I find it equally frustrating that the historical moment captured by *Reading the Romance* is often taught in the academy as the *contemporary* moment, both for the romance genre and for its readers. This easy dismissal of thirty years in the history of the genre refuses to acknowledge the changing content of the novels and the changing demographics of the romance reading community, and it refuses to consider the producers and readers of romance novels as active agents, which Radway herself insists upon. (“The romance *is* being changed and struggled over by the women who write them,” she writes in the second edition's “New Introduction” [16].)

Although my professors and fellow students mostly ignore this ongoing struggle and change, the women who read romance novels outside of the academy don't just take note of it; they talk about it, often in sophisticated ways. Whereas Radway notes that the Smithton women "rarely, if ever, discussed romances with more than one or two individuals" (96) the online romance community of our "particular historical moment" makes it possible for readers to discuss romance novels on a grand and even global scale at review sites such as Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, All About Romance, Dear Author, Love in the Margins, and many more. Not only do readers discuss individual romances, they discuss shifts in the genre and in the industry. And even though the genre's total readership cannot be conflated with the smaller segment of readers and bloggers (who are often white, middle-class, and college-educated), the readers who take part in online discussions are not only conversing about the novels they read, but critiquing them as well.

For example, in my current work on the representation of interracial romance in mainstream historical romance novels, I have found that the overwhelming whiteness of romance has not gone unnoticed by readers. At the romance blog "Heroes and Heartbreakers," Elizabeth Vail's observation that the genre is "**whiter than sour cream**" received over thirty comments, while Sarah Wendell's "**The Subtleties of Race and Culture**" post on Smart Bitches, Trashy Books received 99 replies and generated a discussion regarding the publishing and marketing segregation of African-American romance (par. 2). Olivia Waite recently completed a blog challenge titled "**Intersectional Feminism in Romance from A to Z**" where she examines portrayals of diversity in romance through an intersectional feminist lens in order to understand how these representations both comply and contend with systems of oppression. This is not to say that discussions of the genre weren't happening prior to the Internet, but that the scale and accessibility of these conversations has changed. While the founders of these websites and blogs help facilitate the reading habits of readers in the same manner that Dot does for the Smithton women, a new reader to the genre has access to a particular archive that documents not only where romance has gone but also directions it could go.

I found my voice as a young scholar by speaking to some of the changes in the romance genre and industry since *Reading the Romance* was first published in 1984, and this seminal text helped lead me to a community of readers both inside and outside of the academy: readers who understand the genre is more than just a formula with the requisite happily ever after and want to discuss romance in a sharp and intelligent manner. Romance has come a long way in the past thirty years, and this next chapter in our history will reflect changes and developments in the genre brought about by readers, authors, and scholars. Although she doesn't always get credit for it, Janice Radway was one of the women who launched these ongoing critical and creative conversations. Her work documented its historical moment, and helped to bring about our own.

Works Cited

Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991. Print.